

History of the Structure and Purpose of the Board of Visitors

James Madison's first Secretary of War, James Monroe, wrote on 28 February 1815, "The management of this Institution by a Board of Visitors, will be a subject for future regulation." Before the regulation appeared in print, the first Board met at the Military Academy in December 1815. The Board was composed of Major General Jacob Brown, Mayor DeWitt Clinton of New York City, Doctor Samuel L. Mitchell, a physician and naturalist, and Oliver Wolcott, a financier, former Secretary of the Treasury, and later Governor of Connecticut.

The creation of this Board was in keeping with the established administrative practices relating to college administration in early 19th century America. At West Point, the Board of Visitors was established to look into the details of academic activity and the physical plant of the United States Military Academy and to report its findings to the Secretary of War. It was also a means of promoting favorable public relations.

The existence and membership of the Board were formalized in the 1816 edition of Regulations for the U.S. Military Academy, approved by Madison's second Secretary of War, William Crawford. It stated in the eighth paragraph of the section entitled "Organization of the Academy": "A Board of Visitors shall be constituted, to consist of five gentlemen, versed in military, and other science, of which Board the Superintendent shall be President. The President and members of this Board shall be present at the Academy during the general examination for the purpose of ascertaining the progress and improvement of the students, in the various branches of science and instruction; and also, for the purpose of examining into everything relative to the internal organization, management, and police of the Institution." The Board of Visitors was to be present at the two general examinations given to cadets each year in January and June.

However, a Board of Visitors was not appointed again until 1819, after which the attendance of its members became an accepted part of the ceremony of June examinations.

The July 1821 "General Regulations of the Army" contained a paragraph that dropped the Superintendent as president of the Board and stipulated instead that the Secretary of War would select one of the members as President of the Board.

The Board's mission also was changed slightly to read: "It will be the duty of the Board of Visitors to attend at the academy during the general June examination, annually, for the purpose of ascertaining the progress and improvement of the cadets in each of the branches of science and instruction; of examining into the state of policy and discipline; and of inspecting, generally, the management of the institution; concerning all which, they shall make report to the Secretary of War." The revised version of the Board's mission was reflected in the 1823 Regs, USMA.

Up until 1846, the Secretary of War made appointments to the Board. However, by the Act of Congress of 8 August 1846, the President of the United States was authorized to appoint a more geographically representative and expanded Board of Visitors. The Act provided that "the whole number of visitors each year, shall not exceed the half of the number of states in the Union" (28 at the time); "and that they shall be selected alternately from every second State, each member being a bona fide resident citizen of the State from which he shall be appointed; that not less than six members shall be taken from among officers actually serving in the militia." At that time, the law specifically stated that "administration, fiscal affairs, and other concerns of the Institution" were to be reported on in addition to those areas previously noted.

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The composition of the Board in the first decades was normally made up of high-ranking personalities from higher education, the militia, public and political life, and the Army. The meetings of the Board and its reports were widely reported in the press. In numerous instances, men who came to West Point with a predisposition against the institution endorsed favorable reports.

The roster of the Boards for the first decades of the Academy's existence included such distinguished personalities as Edward Everett, George Bancroft, George Ticknor, Horace Mann, and Generals Joseph G. Totten and Winfield Scott.

The size of the Board was subsequently limited to seven members by an Act of Congress on March 16, 1868.

An Act of Congress of 21 February 1870, stipulated that, in addition to the members of the Board of Visitors appointed by the President, there shall be on every Board "two senators, to be designated by the Vice President or President pro tempore of the Senate; and three members of the House of Representatives, to be designated by the Speaker of the House."

Although in previous regulations it was the "duty" of the Board to attend the annual examinations, the Regs. USMA of 1857 said that the annual examination could be undertaken in the presence of the Board of Visitors "or such members as it shall designate." The Regs. USMA of 1873 stated that the examination should be done "in the presence of the Board of Visitors, or such members as may be present." Thus, what originally was a duty was now just a suggestion.

By the post Civil War period it appears that two factors changed the character and role of the Board of Visitors. The first was that the custom of having the Board hear and monitor the open, public, oral examination at the Military Academy came to an end. Oral examinations were replaced by written examinations graded according to standards established by the Academic Board. The second factor was a change in the membership of the Board. Many of the appointees to the new Boards did not have the distinction, particularly in the field of education, which characterized many members of earlier Boards. Because of their diminished status and role, their findings were not widely reported to the press. In fact, some background correspondence suggests that the Board's report normally summarized the objectives of the Military Academy as indicated by formal and informal conferences with the Superintendent and members of the Academic Board.

Nevertheless, among the members of the Board were individuals who rose to positions of political prominence: future presidents Benjamin Harrison and William McKinley, presidential candidate James G. Blaine, the Camerons of Pennsylvania, John Bigelow, Roscoe Conkling, Samuel S. Cox and Thomas C. Platt of New York, George Hoar of Massachusetts, Justine Morrill of Vermont, Adlai Stevenson of Illinois, and John Sherman of Ohio. Generals George B. McClellan, Horace Porter, Joseph Wheeler and Robert Patterson were members as was Daniel Coit Gilman (the first head of Johns Hopkins University).

According to the Act of Congress of 28 May 1908, the Board of Visitors was to "consist of five members of the Committee on Military Affairs of the Senate, and seven members of the Committee on Military Affairs of the House of Representatives, to be appointed by the respective chairman thereof." The committee members were required to visit the Academy annually and to "inquire into the actual state of the discipline, instruction, police administration, fiscal affairs and other concerns of the Academy."

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The Act of Congress of 17 May 1928, expanded the membership of the Board of Visitors to the following: "five members of the Committee on Military Affairs of the Senate, two members of the Committee on Appropriations of the Senate, seven members of the Committee on Military Affairs of the House of Representatives, and five members of the Committee on Appropriations of the House of Representatives, to be appointed by the respective chairman thereof."

For 40 years, between 1908 and 1948, the Board of Visitors was comprised entirely of members of Congress. There is little information about the members or their activities during this period. In some years, the Board does not appear to have met at all and the members generally did not have the distinction of many of their predecessors.

Public Law 816, of the 80th Congress, an Act of 29 June 1948, expanded the size of the Board and specified the membership as: "the Chairman of the Committee of the Armed Services of the Senate or his designee; three other Members of the Senate to be appointed by the Vice President, or President pro tempore of the Senate, two of whom shall be Members of the Committee on Appropriations of the Senate; the Chairman of the Committee on Armed Services of the House of Representatives or his designee; four other Members of the House of Representatives to be appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, two of whom shall be Members of the Committee on Appropriations of the House of Representatives; and six persons to be appointed by the President."

The 1948 Law also specified that a Board of Visitors should visit the Military Academy each year in April and "inquire into the state of morale and discipline, curriculum, instruction, physical equipment, fiscal affairs, academic methods, and other matters relating to the Military Academy which the Board may decide to consider." The Board was also required, within 60 days of its annual visit, to submit a written report to the President giving its 'views and recommendations pertaining to the United States Military Academy."

The mission and membership of the Board remains unchanged since 1948 except for the addition of an Executive Secretary (included no later than 1951) to assist the Board.

Boards of the post World War II period have included many notable members and appear to have made a more conscientious effort to carry out their responsibilities. Carl Vinson, Richard Russell, Lister Hill, Gerald Ford, Sam Ervin, and Melvin Laird were all Congressional members of the Board during the 1950s and Jacob Javits and Edmund Muskie were among the more notable Congressional members of the 1960s. The addition of presidential appointees also improved the caliber of the Board in the post war period. College presidents such as Clark Kerr of Berkeley, Karl Compton of MIT, Troy Middleton of LSU, and the Reverend John A. Flynn of St. John's were board members as was Frank Bowles of the College Board Testing Service.

In the post World War II era, external academic accrediting agencies have helped promote the maintenance of essential academic standards at leading American institutions of higher learning, to include West Point. Their efforts overlap some of the historic oversight responsibilities of the Board. Although, as a result, the accrediting bodies are helping ensure that the Academy provides the intellectual environment necessary to enable cadets to meet present and future needs, the Board still serves the vital role of mediation. That is, ensuring that West Point remains responsive to societal needs while it seeks to meet contemporary Army and college academic requirements. By keeping the Academy on a balanced course between the demands of its academic, military, and public constituencies, the Board helps ensure that the Academy's policies are in concert with its mission and the needs of the nation.